

The Changing Emphasis in Biblical Studies.

IT is a commonplace that no book in all the world has been subjected to such close and prolonged study as the Bible. It is true that there are other religious texts older than much of our Bible, which are still venerated by the devotees of other faiths. But their study has never been undertaken on the scale of Biblical study. Herein, not infrequently, is found testimony to the uniqueness of this Book, and its influence upon mankind.

For many centuries its study was governed by a static conception of its inspiration, but there was an ever-moving centre of interest, according to the theological or ecclesiastical controversies of the time. Its texts were regarded as alike inspired, and each side in controversy selected such as were of service and ignored all others.

Especially was this so in the period that followed the Reformation, when not only did Protestant and Catholic seek Scriptural basis for their mutual controversies, but when the various bodies of Protestants that came into being sought each to establish by the authority of the Bible the rightness of its faith and practice. Nor were the Protestants content to accept the Latin Bible that had been for so long the Bible of the Western Church. They sought to establish the real text of the Bible, and went behind the Latin to the Hebrew of the Old Testament, and the Greek of the New. Soon such other ancient versions as could be found were laid under contribution, and the great polyglot editions of the Bible are the enduring witness to the zeal and devotion and scholarship that were consecrated to this task. It was inspired by the faith that the words of this Book were final in controversy, and that therefore it was of supreme importance to know what were its real words—the words in which it was written by its Divine Author. Disagreement as to the text of Scripture, and still more controversy as to its interpretation, divided the parties, but there was no fundamental disagreement as to its inspiration, or as to the essential nature of that inspiration.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the study of the Bible took on new forms, and controversies became more radical. With the rise of rationalism all the premises of the Church were questioned, and the new study of the Bible

threatened the foundations of the veneration in which it had been held. The traditions as to the date and authorship of the various books were challenged one by one, books were traced back to earlier documents or split asunder and assigned to various authors, and the sense of a divine hand behind the Bible was often lost in the study of the human processes that brought it together, and it became to many a common book and a merely human document.

Not all who became the followers of the newer school of Biblical criticism were enemies of the faith, however, as their opponents too often affirmed. There were not a few who, alongside an utterly unhampered study of questions of authorship and source, retained a spirit of true reverence for the Bible. Yet it must be recognized that to many Biblical study became a matter of merely scientific investigation, the detached examination of an ancient literature, and the establishment of its text and the meaning that text had for the original writers. To understand the times in which a book was written, and to think oneself back into those times, and to feel anew the impact of the words upon their first hearers, was to reach the goal of Biblical study.

Moreover, the nineteenth century saw the expansion of science, and the formulation of the Darwinian theory of evolution. In the philosophical sphere the work of Hegel had already prepared the way for this theory, but its formulation in the biological sphere brought a fresh attack on the Bible. Its scientific accuracy was discredited, and its divine origin and authority rejected. Here it was by the adaptation of the fundamental principle of development, so differently applied by Hegel and Darwin to the philosophical and biological spheres, and its application to the religious sphere, that the answer was found. Revelation was found to be no longer the static thing it had so long been held to be, but progress in the religion of the Bible was seen and expounded. Again, however, it must be agreed that not seldom revelation became dissolved in discovery, and in the development of religious knowledge unfolded in the Bible there was found nothing but the evolution of man on the religious side of his being.

It was inevitable that this attitude should threaten the position of Jesus in the faith of the Church. To many he became a mere moment in the religious evolution of man, a stage in the upward growth, important as introducing a new era and as a religious genius, but no more. His humanity, which had been so largely forgotten in the contemplation of His divinity, was re-emphasized to such an extent that His divinity was treated as a mere dogma, which could safely be ignored in the effort to get back to the Jesus of the first century, to see Him with the

eyes of His contemporaries, and to feel the throbbing vitality of His human voice and touch.

Again, Biblical archaeology is the creation of the nineteenth century, and its discoveries in that century and expansion in the twentieth have contributed greatly to the study of the Bible. Not a little of its research has been inspired by the desire to establish the accuracy of the historical statements of the Bible, and in recent years the claim is insistently made that it does this. Seldom, however, does archaeology provide direct confirmation of historical statements in the Bible, and its evidence often greatly complicates the task of the Biblical historian. Nevertheless, the rich and abundant material it provides is always of the greatest importance to the student of the Bible for the understanding of the historical and cultural background of the events described in the Bible.

In recent years a new change is coming over Biblical study, whose significance is far too little perceived. The newer attitude does not reject the work of the earlier study, but seeks to conserve all that is of worth in the fruits of every approach. Yet it desires to transcend them. It accepts substantially the work of Biblical criticism, but beyond the desire to understand the date and authorship of the books of the Bible and the meaning they had for their first hearers, it seeks the abiding significance of the Bible, and in particular its significance for this generation. It recognizes all the human processes that went into the making of the Bible, without reducing the Bible to a merely human document, and it acknowledges that its scientific study, which is still valued and continued, is not enough. For the Bible is first and foremost a religious book.

It must be emphasized that the many-sided work that has been done, mistaken in its emphasis as it has often been, is of very great importance, and every side of the work is still continued and advanced. The establishment of the text of the Bible still commands much attention, and is still far from achieved. For the Old Testament the Hebrew text is no more infallible than the Vulgate, and a simple reliance upon the polyglot texts for the versions has long since given place to a recognition that the versions themselves, as well as the Hebrew text, have all had a history, and no longer stand before us in their original form. The study of Hebrew prosody has brought a new instrument for textual criticism. It has not seldom been used with more confidence than the insecurity of the theories that have determined its use has warranted, but its value will survive its abuse. New materials for the study of the Hebrew language are continually coming to light, and many rare forms and words may now be understood, instead of being emended. Textual

corruption must still be often enough found, and is not surprising in documents of such antiquity, but there is a less ready resort to conjectural emendation to-day, and a greater patience in threading the way through the complexities of textual criticism.

For the New Testament the problems have always been of a different order, and conjectural emendation has never been the bane of its textual criticism as in the case of the Old. Here the patient examination of the many manuscripts, and their grouping into classes, with the minute study of the relations within and between the groups, have brought fresh materials for the establishment of the text. The intensive study of the versions here also yields fruits for textual criticism, though the situation is so different from that of the Old Testament, since here no manuscripts are extant of any version antedating by centuries the oldest known manuscripts in the original language. Rich finds of papyri have added greatly to our knowledge of the Greek *Koine*, and have brought much light for the understanding of words and forms in the New Testament.

On none of this work is there any disposition to turn the back. Its importance is fully recognized, but not over-estimated. Even if we could establish with certainty the exact text of the Old and New Testaments, and had perfect philological knowledge of every word and form they contained, we should still need other equipment before we could understand the message of God to men embodied in the Bible. For the Bible is, primarily and fundamentally, God's word to man, and through all its human processes of authorship and transmission there is a divine process. Its recognition is not new, indeed, but it is claiming a more central place in Biblical study, and it is this that constitutes the most significant change of recent years.

The newer attitude still recognizes the clear marks of progress in the Biblical revelation, yet it does not reduce revelation to discovery. It does not cease to be interested in the development of religion, but its centre of interest is not in man, but in God. It does not find the story of man's growth in the understanding of God of such absorbing interest that it becomes an end in itself, but rather seeks to perceive in every stage of the process that which is enduringly true of God. It is for this reason that there is a revived interest in the Theology of the Old Testament, as against the development of religion in Israel. This does not mean the eclipse of the historical sense, but the perception that through the historical development the nature, will and purpose of God were being unfolded, in the light of which alone the development can be rightly understood. It is for this reason that the Old Testament, itself so essential to the understanding of the New, can never be fully understood

without the New. There is a Theology of the Old Testament distinct from the Theology of the New, yet the one cannot be properly understood without the other. It is unnecessary to read back the New Testament into the Old, or to obscure the differences between them, but it is necessary to recognize that the Theology of the New Testament is rooted in the Theology of the Old, while the Theology of the Old Testament reaches its full fruition in that of the New.

No longer, therefore, do we suppose that when we have understood words as their first hearers understood them we have achieved the goal of Biblical study. Too often hearing they heard not, and even those who uttered the words can have perceived less of their implications than we should. *Magna Carta* should have a fuller meaning to us, who look back on a thousand years of the unfolding freedom to which it led, than it could have had to those who framed it. And so the work of Moses and Elijah and Paul lay not alone in what it was in itself, but in what it has continued to achieve in ages far beyond their horizons.

So is it, too, with the Person of Jesus. The newer attitude welcomes the emphasis on His humanity, without ceasing to perceive His true divinity. It can read the Gospels and see Him a real man amongst men, without falling into the lamentable error of supposing that when it has seen Him with the eyes of His contemporaries, it has seen Him as He was. What we see depends on the eyes we look with, as well as on that whereon we look, and they who looked on Jesus but as the Carpenter of Galilee, albeit as a singularly gracious and inspiring personality, but who did not see in Him the Son of God, saw less than we may see.

Again, the newer attitude welcomes the light that archaeology brings to the understanding of the Bible, but it finds real peril in the attempt to turn it to the establishment of the historical trustworthiness of the Bible. That the Bible has a far greater measure of historical trustworthiness than any other literature of comparable antiquity can be established without difficulty, but it is quite impossible to establish the historical inerrancy of the Bible. Nor can archaeology be said in any sense to establish such inerrancy. All the material that archaeology provides is to be welcomed, and carefully sifted and examined, and all the light that it can shed on the Bible is to be gladly accepted. Wherever its evidence tends to confirm the trustworthiness or credibility of Biblical statements, it is to be welcomed; but where its evidence goes clearly against Biblical statements, or creates new difficulties for the Biblical historian, this is to be frankly recognized. But it is not to be forgotten that the Bible is not a

historical text-book, but a religious book, through which God speaks to men. Any understanding which misses this is inadequate and incomplete, and it is perilous to encourage men to read it for what it is not, instead of for what it is.

The newer attitude to the Bible is therefore marked by the utmost frankness and the fullest scholarship. But it perceives that no merely intellectual understanding of the Bible, however complete, can possess all its treasures. It does not despise such an understanding, for it is essential to a complete understanding. But it must lead to a spiritual understanding of the spiritual treasures of this Book if it is to become complete. And for that spiritual understanding something more than intellectual alertness is necessary. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned, and the Bible student needs an attitude of spiritual receptivity, an eagerness to find God that he may yield himself to Him, if he is to pass beyond his scientific study into the richer inheritance of this greatest of all books.

It will be perceived that none of the elements of this attitude is in itself new. What is growingly characteristic of present-day Biblical study is the synthesis of these elements. There have always been those who have read the Bible as the Word of God, with eager desire to understand its spiritual message to their own hearts. But most of these have had little use for many of the lines of modern study, and have retained the older view of inspiration. On the other hand, it is undeniable that there has been a scholarship which has been so exclusively scientific that it has shown no spiritual quality. This has never fully represented Biblical scholarship, though it has often involved it in reproach. To-day it is quite unrepresentative of scholarship, with its fuller recognition of the religious quality of the Bible, and with its desire not alone to recover ancient situations, cultures and beliefs, but to find behind and through them the One unchanging God, revealing Himself in all the Scripture, and unfolding His holy will and purpose for mankind. This ancient Book is God's word to us, relevant to the modern world and to our hearts. We do it no honour when we bring to it closed minds; still less do we honour it when we come to it with closed hearts. All the intellectual acuteness, honesty, and candour, on which we have so often insisted, is to be desired; but with it that spiritual penetration, which is given to the pure in heart. And the two must be blended in a single approach to this incomparable Book.

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